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ABSTRACT

One of the most important advantages to using literature with developmental writing students is that some pieces can be used as illustrations of important rhetorical principles and strategies that the instructor would like students to use in their own writing. The most important reason to use literature has to do with its usefulness as a source of inspiration. To build the students' confidence, teachers need to involve them in reading that elicits powerful, often very personal, reactions to written language. One way to use literature as a springboard for creative efforts is by asking students to keep a journal in which they can record responses to brief writing prompts designed to help them improve their understanding of literature. The instructor must choose selections that are accessible to the student both in vocabulary and in subject matter. The objective is not to introduce students to the study of literature, to important cultural phenomena in the canon, or even to new vocabulary. It is to foster their growth as writers. Instructors must also prepare their classes somewhat differently and perhaps more carefully when using literature as a springboard for developmental writers. (MG)

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SOURCES OF INSPIRATION: USING LITERATURE IN THE DEVELOPMENTAL WRITING CLASS

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In "Literature in the Basic Writing Course: A Bibliographic Survey," Christopher Gould reminds us that several years ago, the College English Association's Committee on the Undergraduate Curriculum made several important recommendations about strengthening the role of literature in the undergraduate curriculum. One of the Committee's major concerns was the fact that American colleges and universities were beginning to attract "a new and unprecendentedly diverse student body...whose cultural and ethnic backgrounds would at an earlier time have precluded their attending college." (558)

In addition, however, the Committee reflected a major concern of English and humanities instructors throughout the country: as a result of significant revisions in traditional college curricula in the 1970's ("curriculum evisceration", some would call it), few students have the opportunity or the inclination to study literature in a formal academic setting beyond the freshman year. In many schools, traditional liberal arts curricula now include literature courses only as electives or as parts of larger humanities clusters from which students are asked to choose electives.

Since its issuance over a decade ago, the CEA statement has taken on added significance chiefly because of the enormous growth in the number of "non-traditional" students both four-year and two-year community colleges have been able to attract. Representing a wide variety of cultural, ethnic, economic, and academic backgrounds, they

include minorities and ESL students, as well as students who choose to pursue non-college preparatory curricula in high school.

This new awareness of the need to expose students to literature as early in the curriculum as possible ("before they get away," some might say) has for some time resulted in an attempt to combine the reading of literature with the reading of traditional expository models in credit-bearing freshman writing courses--courses students must pass to graduate. As one might expect, a great body of research aimed at describing and measuring in the effects of using both expository models and literature in college-level writing courses is available, and the number of rhetorical readers, mixed-genre anthologies, and other collections of reading materials available for use in credit-bearing composition classes has always been more than abundant.

Unfortunately, few such texts meet the needs of developmental writers, and almost none give literature a prominent role in their tables of contents. Indeed, many anthologies that claim to be designed specifically for the developmental writing class are simply collections of essays drawn from traditional freshman readers. Often arranged thematically, they contain little apparatus to help students use what they read to improve their own writing. More important, few reflect a concern for the pedagogical connection between reading and writing.

Too often, we teachers of developmental writing approach our task armed only with grammar and sentence-combining texts, and we make little attempt to capitalize upon the advantages that would result

from integrating the reading of both expository and literary texts with the teaching of composition. This state of affairs persists despite the fact that research in the teaching of composition has long pointed to the obvious connection between reading and writing skills, that many composition theorists insist no writing program can be effective without the integration of these skills in classroom instruction, and that many teachers of developmental writing are already aware of the need to increase the emphasis on critical reading as a way to reinforce the teaching of basic rhetorical principles and to improve the student's appreciation for language.

Perhaps the most inappropriate reason that literature is denied a prominent place in syllabi designed for developmental writing students is that instructors, curriculum coordinators, textbook committees, and college administrators, though well-meaning, often operate under the assumption that basic-skills students simply do not possess the intellectual preparation to approach literary texts with the same critical sophistication we have come to expect, albeit naively, from students enrolled in credit-bearing classes. Indeed, they argue, many developmental writing students also suffer from weak comprehension skills, and they are often co-enrolled in developmental reading class.

All of this is undeniable. Fortunately, it is irrelevant. Using literature in a developmental writing course--in any writing course for that manner--has nothing to do with helping students analyze literature better; it has everything to do with inspiring them to find their own voices through writing and to use writing as a tool for thinking and discovery. The fact that they possess less than college-

level reading and writing skills means only that they may be "cognitively immature," to quote Robert Bergstrom, and that they might need more coaxing and greater direction to profit from exposure to literature. As Bergstrom explains in "Discovery of Meaning: Development of Formal Thought in the Teaching of Literature," to make effective the use of literature in a developmental writing course, instructors need to approach and discuss reading assignments only so as "to help students develop mental tools which will enable them to assimilate" literary texts (748).

In the case of some ESL students, students who may have already developed excellent writing and reading skills in their native languages, not much "mental coaxing" is necessary. In fact, as those of us who have worked with such students have learned, many of them come fully equipped with the "mental tools," if not the lexical expertise, to deal with even the most exotic literary text. In short, the argument that developmental students are not ready for literature is pointless.

The second and more understandable reason so many developmental writing teachers hesitate to include literature in the syllabus is that they fear it will dilute instruction in writing. Feeding this fear is concern over the fact that a larger and more diverse population of students is being required to enroll in developmental writing classes while few if any new teaching lines are being established to meet the demand. The result is often an expansion of class sizes beyond reasonable limits. Even more significant is the pressure some teachers feel as a result of standardized, often

statewide, exit-testing programs. As necessary as these programs are to maintaining standards, their influence is seductive, suggesting ultimately that the best way to help students gain competencies demanded by basic-skills placement is to teach test-relevant skills or, even worse, to "teach to" the exam itself. In short, some of us have begun to believe that composition skills and only composition skills deserve a place in the developmental writing class, and that we simply have enough to do without teaching literature.

There may be some validity to all of this. Nevertheless, what I am advocating is not the addition of literature to the syllabus; it is the integration of reading--including the reading of literature--with the other important activities that are part of the process of learning to write at every level. Literature has a place in the developmental writing class first and foremost because our students deserve it. We simply have no right to deny them exposure to the depth and pleasures of imaginative writing simply because they might find it difficult or because we instructors feel pressed for time.

Second, if we affirm the import relationship between learning to read and learning to write and if we support that affirmation by using expository prose to illustrate important principles of language and rhetoric, it makes sense to go beyond the essay and to include at least poetry and fiction in the syllabus. (I also advocate using drama, but plays usually require more discussion than poems and short stories.)

Third and most important, it is often easier to use literature as a prompt for writing--especially with developmental students--than to

use expository prose. One of the greatest problems teachers of developmental writing face is getting students to generate information. Most rely heavily on freewriting, the keeping of journals, brainstorming, and other information-gathering techniques. But in all cases, some kind of a prompt--however limited or extensive--must be provided. The imaginative quality of poetry and fiction, which is valuable in and of itself, can also be used as a source of inspiration for student writers and as a tool to help teachers of writing tap their students' conscious and subconscious wellsprings of information and insights about important aspects of their lives. Such insights can serve as the focus of effective writing projects in which students will want to explain and explore those realities more fully, both for their readers and for themselves.

Of course, the greatest temptation to resist in this context is the use of the text solely to teach literary analysis or interpretation. The discussion of literature in class should be aimed directly at helping students improve their writing. As in any composition course, therefore, class discussion, no matter what the subject, should focus on the students' own work. There is no point in explaining why Anne Sexton uses figurative language in "Pain for a Daughter" (a selection I have used with success) or how such language "illuminates" Sexton's theme, or "prefigures" her suicide for that matter, unless we can show students how to use such language to discuss equally powerful themes derived from their own experiences or from those of people they know well. In short, we need to help students see how poetic language will help them enrich their own

writing and empower them as thinkers and as communicators, just as it empowered Sexton.

This brings me to what I believe are the most important advantages to using literature with developmental students. Of

course, there is always the fact that literature enriches the soul, but we can also glean some very "measurable" results from it as well.

First, some pieces can be use as illustrations of important rhetorical principles and strategies that the instructor would like students to use in their own writing. The use of such models is, of course, limited. Few poems lend themselves to the teaching of principles useful to organizing an argument, and fiction is rarely the best place to find models of effective introductions and conclusions. However, poetry is sometimes effective in helping to teach students the use of concrete language, both literal and figurative, which transfers quite nicely to their own prose. Fiction can teach them much about the use of transitions, the ordering of chronologies, the creation of dialogue, the use of the five senses to gather concrete detail, and the depiction of settings and characters, all of which relate directly to the narrative and descriptive assignments that work so well in developmental writing courses.

But the most important reason to put literature in a syllabus has to do with its usefulness as a source of inspiration. Because they are products of the imagination, poems and short stories provide students with a way to tap their conscious and subconscious memories and to rediscover sources of details, insights, emotions, and ideas from their own experiences, which they can use as the raw materials for writing. The first major hurdle for any writer--and especially for the novice--is the blank page. Many developmental students believe that they have little of value to say. Sadly, they seem convinced that their lives and the lives of people they know well will

yield nothing of interest to their teachers, to their fellow students, and even to themselves.

In order to build their confidence, we need to involve them in reading that elicits powerful, often very personal, reactions to written language, reactions which can help them identify, understand, and discuss important human concerns mirrored in their own worlds. This is not to say that everything students are assigned to read must reflect their physical or psychic environments, but only that literature should be used to inspire them to write about topics that they find important.

Of course, all great literature is by definition inspirational: it touches what is deepest in the human personality and forces us to reflect upon our characters and upon the experiences that have shaped it. Few of us can read Frost's "Wood Pile," for instance, without recalling some part of a winter's walk we have taken through a lonely forest; few can read Robinson's "Richard Cory" without knowing what is means to "curse the bread" or at least wondering how deceptive life can be. Few still can read Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" or Sexton's "Pain for a Daughter" without feeling some strong emotion for a parent or child and without recalling--even for the briefest moment--an interesting detail or anecdote that might illuminate that relationship, that might bring us to discover something about ourselves, that might bring us to a new realization about what is means to be human, and that might inspire a fine short story or an essay for a college writing class.

One of the best ways to use literature with developmental

writers, then, is a springboard for their own creative efforts. There are several ways to do so. For me, the easiest and most effective has been to ask students to keep a journal in which they can record responses to brief writing prompts designed to help them improve their understanding of the literature or to make important cognitive connections between a selection's contents, its theme, or its characters and their own experiences--experiences, once again, that can provide the focus for their writing.

Though promising as a pedagogical tool, the use of literature as an effective springboard to writing must be approached carefully. The instructor must choose selections that are accessible to the developmental reader both in vocabulary and subject matter. That does not mean, of course, that students should be denied exposure to a work simply because it may require the understanding of an historical context or because it uses language that is dated, exotic, or otherwise unfamiliar. After all, a student's reach should exceed her grasp. It does mean that we ought to exert special care in choosing reading materials appropriate to audience and purpose. The objective, once again, is not to introduce students to the study of literature, to important cultural phenomena in the "canon," or even to new vocabulary. It is to foster their growth as writers.

Using literature as a springboard for developmental writers also means that instructors will have to prepare their classes somewhat differently and perhaps a great deal more carefully than they prepare for more advanced students by:

* choosing textbooks that will provide clear and straightforward explanations of unfamiliar contexts,

allusions, and vocabulary;

* creating specialized learning tools to help students grapple with a task that may seems foreign, foreboding, and intimidating;

* spending sufficient time reading aloud from the text and discussing what the literature means and how it works as integral parts of pre-writing and as prerequisites to information gathering;

* providing students with well-defined and well-developed prompts that will help them respond to the literature in their journals or in other short writing projects;

* designing effective suggestions for sustained writing based upon classroom discussion or on details, insights, and ideas gleaned from pre-writing assignments inspired by the literature.

Finally and most importantly, we will need to be patient. Exposing developmental writing students to literature and expecting them to draw inspiration from it might yield disappointing dividends at first. But we must stick with it. At the very least, we will broaden the syllabus and make it more interesting. We might even help students strengthen their writing and enrich their lives.

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